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ABSTRACT

Dialogue journals serve as conversations between teacher and student and provide a student-centered, communicative activity in which literacy skills can develop naturally. Students write as much as they choose about any topic, and the teacher responds as a co-participant in an ongoing, written conversation. The journals can be adapted to a variety of learning situations and learner needs, and they can be used effectively with students at all levels from beginning literacy to high proficiency. The dialogue journal interaction has many of the features found in conversations with children learning a first language and in conversations between second language learners and native speakers in an informal context. It focuses on real topics, and on meaning rather than form; it is a reading and writing event; the dialogue moves naturally from familiar to unfamiliar material; the use of grammatical forms and structures evolves naturally; and correction of student errors can take the form of modeling rather than overt criticism. At the lower proficiency levels, students can begin communication with pictures and let verbal communication develop when they are ready. Dialogue journals can also be used in pre-employment training and cultural orientation classes to encourage discussion. The key concept is genuine interaction between the student and someone with whom he or she wants to communicate. (MSE)

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Literacy Through Written Interaction

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This article presents the use of dialogue journal writing as one approach for developing students' literacy skills. Dialogue journals can be adapted to a variety of learning situations and learner needs and can be used effectively with students at all levels – from beginning literacy to more advanced. The article explains the nature of language acquisition and literacy development through written dialogues and outlines procedures for setting up a dialogue journal program.

Although the primary emphasis of the Overseas Refugee Training Program's ESL component has been on oral language proficiency, the development of students' literacy skills – from basic first-language literacy to the more advanced level of writing extended prose in English – has also become an important concern. This shift has occurred in part because of the obvious advantage that refugees with literacy skills have in finding jobs in the United States, and in part because of an understanding of the interrelationship between oral (speaking and listening) and written (reading and writing) language development. It is now clear that literacy in a second language need not be treated separately from and taught after oral language development. Second, language learners are able to read and write in the second language before they have complete control of the oral language. In fact, reading and writing in a second language can contribute to oral language development (see Hudelson 1984 and Krashen & Terrell 1983 for a discussion of research findings related to this interrelationship).

This article suggests that dialogue journals – ongoing, written "conversations" between students and a teacher in a bound notebook – provide a student-centered, communicative activity in which literacy skills can develop naturally.

What is a dialogue journal?

A dialogue journal is a bound notebook in which a teacher and student communicate regularly – daily, if possible – in writing. Students write as much as they choose about any topic, and the teacher responds to each student as a co-participant in an ongoing, written conversation – asking questions, answering students' questions, making comments, but never evaluating or correcting. The following example, from the journal of a Burmese student ten months after he had started attending school in the U.S., illustrates the nature of the interaction.*

February 9

Michael: You know on this week like the silly week. I don't know what happen on this week. What did you mean about the valentines you said we have to bring the valentines. Did we have to made the valentines for people in our classroom? I dint know what are you talking.

Teacher: No, we don't have to send anyone a valentine. It is just a fun thing to do.

*Although examples in this article come from the dialogue journals of sixth-grade students (in Los Angeles, California), they still illustrate general patterns and concepts relevant to the adults and high school students in the Overseas Refugee Training Program. All of these students are beginning ESL learners who had been in the U.S. for less than one year when they began this activity. Permission was granted by the students and their parents to print extracts from their journals. Entries are transcribed as nearly as possible to their original form.

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Sometimes we like someone but we do not tell them. We feel funny telling someone we really like them. Giving a valentine is an easy way of doing it. If you want to give a valentine or fifty valentines it doesn't matter – you do what you want about that.

February 10

Michael: I know what is the valentine but I don't know what I have to do and the valentine is, we have to give the cards to someone, and I have to buy the card, but I can't buy the cards thats is the problems. I think I'm not going to play softball because I did not do nothing about it, and Ricardo says I could be the catcher and he break his promise.

Teacher: No problem! Anyone who wants to give valentines can. If you don't want to give valentines you don't have to.
Talk to Ricardo again. I'm sure he forgot his promise when others on the team began yelling. Did you ever find your pen?

February 11

Michael: I didn't not find my pen. Happy Valentine! I want to give the cards to people but I can't give the cards to people. I give the one card to the simon. I think Level 10 hard me. Did you think Level 10 is hard for me? I saw the Thanksgiving Pilgrim in the book. You know, today morning U Chal put cards in every bag except Tony. I know why U Chal put the cards every card because he put cards into every bag so that he margar him. You said we are going to do the art with the shoe box, and you said you don't have the shoe box you can't do art.

Teacher: I am not sure what you said. U Chul put cards in everyone's sack so they don't *margar* him? What word did you put there? Please tell me.
Yes, we will do the shoebox art. Everyone who has a shoebox will do it. Have a happy vacation. I will see you in five days.

Two studies of dialogue journal writing – one of a class of native English speakers (Staton, et al., in press) and one with a class of non-native English speakers (Kreeft, et al. 1984), both sixth grade classes, identified the following characteristics of the interaction:

- The writing has the qualities of good conversation. Both parties can choose topics to discuss and both can contribute equally, asking questions, giving information and opinions, etc.
- The writing is student generated. Because the students in these studies wrote first each day, the writing generally focused on topics that they introduced and were interested in. The teacher also initiated topics, but most often responded to topics initiated by the students, thus supporting and sustaining student topic development. Some topics were introduced briefly and quickly dropped (e.g., the question about Michael's pen in the example above); those that held more interest were continued over the course of several days or even months (e.g., the discussion about valentines).

Students write as much as they choose about any topic, and the teacher responds to each student as a co-participant in an ongoing, written conversation...

- The writing is functional, used to accomplish a wide range of real-life purposes that are important to the student. Just as in learning oral language, it is important that students have the opportunity to use written language in a variety of ways, in addition to writing assigned compositions or completing structured exercises. The example above includes an expression of an opinion ("You know on this week like the silly week"), a request for an opinion ("Did you think Level 10 is hard for me?"), a request for clarification ("What did you mean about the valentines ...?"), a description of a personal problem ("... we have to give the cards to someone, and I have to buy the card, but I can't buy the cards thats is the problems"), and a complaint ("Ricardo says I could be the catcher and he break his promise").
- The teacher's language is roughly tuned to the language proficiency level of the student. Compare an exchange in Kemmy's journal, a Vietnamese student with a very low level of English proficiency, with another exchange from Michael's journal, written on the same day.

Kemmy: today we are doing spelling is good and today I am so happy so funny ... sompob

He have New journal and He so happy and I have two journal I am have two ... Andy He 3 journal.

Teacher: Andy has his 3rd journal. Sompob has his 4th journal and Kemmy has his 2nd journal. You all are writing in your journal every day.
Today we had a spelling bee. Kemmy spelled words for us. It was fun. I am glad Kemmy is spelling.

Michael: I know I was saying the bad language. I will stop saying the bad language. I know why I get in trouble and I don't go out to play. I don't get in trouble. So I won't go out and play.
Today is friday 13 and it is bad luck day because we got report card, math test and spelling test. How come people said friday 13 is the bad luck day?

Teacher: It is just an idea that people have! 13 is supposed to be a bad luck number and when it comes on Friday it is even more bad luck. Some people think Friday the thirteenth is good luck.
It is good for you to be out playing. It is very good for you to learn to control your temper and your tongue.

The teacher writes simple sentences with Kemmy, using words he knows and has used in his own entry and even using his name to catch his attention so he will want to read what she has written. In contrast, she and Michael discuss a cultural point and reflect on and work through a problem he is having. Vocabulary and syntax are also considerably more advanced in Michael's journal.

• There is no overt error correction in the journals. The teacher has many opportunities to correct errors on other assignments, but this is one place where students write freely, without the need to focus on form. (The teacher could, of course, take note of error patterns found in the journals and use them as the basis for later lessons in class.) The teacher's response in the journal serves instead as a model of correct English usage in the context of the dialogue. Sometimes the same structures that the student has attempted to use are modeled and more details added, as in this example from Michael's journal.

Michael: today morning you said this is *my lovely friends* right? She told me about book story name is "the lady first in the air." She tell me *this lady* was first in the air, and she is flying in Pacific ocean, and she lose it *everybody find her but they can't find it. They looked in the ocean still not here*. Did she know everything of book? [Emphasis added.]

Teacher: *My lovely friend* Mrs. P reads a lot. She has read the book about *Amelia Earhart*. It is a good story and it is a true story. *They looked and looked but they never found her airplane or her.* [Emphasis added.]

This example was chosen because it so clearly demonstrates modeling. Of course, such direct modeling of particular structures and vocabulary is not the norm, nor would this be possible or desirable, for the journals would quickly become stilted and unnatural. More often, modeling takes the form of correct English usage by the teacher, stated roughly at the student's level of ability and about a topic in which the student has expressed interest.

It should be noted that this teacher has had no ESL training and is not making a conscious attempt to gear her language to the student's level or to use certain words and structures. Her purpose for the dialogue journals is not so much to teach English, as to maintain an open channel of communication with each student. The patterns that we see here have simply grown out of her desire to communicate effectively.

Dialogue Journals and Literacy Acquisition

The major assumption linking the interactive written conversation that occurs in dialogue journal writing with the acquisition of literacy skills is that the same principles that guide oral first and second language acquisition guide literacy acquisition as well (Staton 1981; Shuy, in press). The dialogue journal interaction has many of the features that are found in conversations between children learning a first language and between second language learners and native speakers of that language in an informal context. (See Krashen 1981, 1982 for discussion of these features in oral first and second language acquisition; Krashen 1984 for discussion of these conditions in writing; and Staton 1984 for application to dialogue journal writing.) These features are:

• The interaction focuses on "real" topics and issues introduced by and of interest to the learner.

• The focus is on meaning rather than on form.

• Dialogue journals are a reading as well as a writing event (Staton 1985). The language input that the learner receives from reading the teacher's entry is interesting and modified to, but slightly beyond, the learner's language proficiency, what Krashen calls the student's i+1 (Krashen 1981). The level of material that students read in dialogue journals differs, therefore, from what they read in language experience stories, where they read what they themselves have produced orally. In dialogue journals, they read what another person has produced, at a level of language that is slightly beyond their productive ability.

• The dialogue moves naturally from material that is familiar to the student (e.g., past experiences) or shared with the teacher (e.g., classroom experiences) to the less familiar (e.g., new experiences, new ideas, and future plans).

• The use of grammatical forms and structures evolves naturally in the process of the interaction.

• Rather than overt correction of student errors, correct grammatical forms and structures can be modeled in the course of the interaction. Genuine requests for clarification can remedy breakdowns of communication resulting from errors in form.

Benefits of Journal Writing to Teachers and Students

Besides the obvious benefit to students of acquiring literacy skills and language skills in general, observations of classrooms in which dialogue journals are being used and discussions with teachers using them suggest a number of additional benefits.

• The amount of contact time between student and teacher is increased.

• In journal writing, students have the opportunity to express themselves freely, without fear of censure or embarrassment. Because the interaction is written, students have time to reread previous entries and to reflect before having to respond. As they receive positive feedback from the teacher, they gain confidence in their ability to express themselves in English, and in writing.

• The reading and writing that is done is closely tied to the students' life experience and gives them the opportunity to reflect upon that experience with another person.

• All students, no matter what their language proficiency level, can participate in the activity to some extent. In classes made up of students with a range of ability levels, many often feel lost and unable to keep up with the classwork. But even these students can put something in a journal and thus feel part of the class.

• Journals provide a means for teachers to discover student interests and concerns. This information not only builds strong ties with students, but is a valuable aid to lesson planning.

In journal writing, students have the opportunity to express themselves freely, without fear of censure or embarassment.

• Through the journals, teachers can individualize instruction and build on and enhance each student's abilities.

• Students' entries give a good indication of their progress. Contrast this entry from Michael's journal on the second day of school with his entry on page 26, written six months later.

> What are we learning.
> Today what P.E is.
> I like play Baceball.
> Next week P.E is what.

Conclusion

Dialogue journals are especially suited for upper-level students who are already able to write with some ease and confidence. But they can also be a powerful means of helping lower-level students understand that marks on paper can communicate a real message. At these levels, there need be no pressure to write, *per se*. Students can begin by drawing pictures with the teacher drawing pictures in reply, perhaps with words underneath. The move to letters and words can be made when students are ready. At beginning levels, where students' ability to write is limited, the interaction may be more valuable as a reading event, with more emphasis placed on reading the teacher's entry than on writing one. In classes with an aide or where native language literacy is the focus, it is also possible to conduct the dialogue journal interaction in the students' native language. Again, the move to English can occur as students are ready.

Dialogue journals need not be limited to ESL classes; they may be also useful in Pre-Employment Training and Cultural Orientation classes to encourage discussion relevant to those curricula and

students' responses to them. The key concept in dialogue journals is that reading and writing at all levels and in any curriculum can be interactive, just as speaking is, and students' literacy skills can develop along with their speaking skills – in the context of a genuine interaction with a person with whom they want to communicate.

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Setting up a Dialogue Journal Program

The reader interested in using dialogue journals in the classroom should consider the following matters:*

1. Most teachers have found that a bound, easily portable notebook is best, so that all entries are kept together in a chronological sequence. The notebook should be used only for this purpose. Paperbound composition books are available in a convenient size large enough to allow sufficient writing and small enough that the teacher can easily take all notebooks home after class. Of course, some students may fill more than one notebook during a term.
2. It is important that the writing be done regularly throughout the term, but the frequency can be flexible, depending on the number of students in a class, class times, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and students. With large classes, all students may write two or three times a week, or half of the class may write one day and the other half the next. Since most teachers in the Overseas Refugee Training Program teach more than one class per day, they may choose to use dialogue journals with only one class, or with one class one day and another the next.
3. It may be desirable to set a minimum amount that students must write each time (three sentences, for example), but the amount of writing beyond that should be up to the individual student. Students should understand that long, polished pieces are not required. Teachers should respond to each student entry, roughly matching it in length.
4. Most teachers find it best to give their students time to write during the class session, the teacher responding after class. This time could be at the beginning of class as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition time. If time is given before a break, students have the option of continuing to write during the break if they choose. Ten or fifteen minutes is adequate for students to read the teacher's entry and to write a new one. If too much time is given, students may feel compelled to write extensively.
5. When introducing the idea of dialogue journals, the teacher should tell the students that they will be having a continuing, private conversation in writing, that they can write about whatever they want, and that the teacher will be writing to them also, but not correcting errors. The mechanics of when they will write, when the journals will be turned in, when they will be returned, etc., should be explained.

Some students won't know what to write. To start them off, the teacher might suggest three or four sentences, or students may suggest a number of sentences, write them on the board, and then choose from them. This was a first entry used by the teacher in Los Angeles for students to copy if they wished:

> This is the first day of school in Room 11.
> I am in sixth grade.
> My teacher is Mrs. R.
> It was a hot and humid day.

Very few students copied the model, but it was there if needed. The important thing is that everyone has something to write and they feel comfortable with it.

*This list of considerations was developed by Carol Harmartz, Georgetown University.

For more details on setting up a dialogue journal program, consult It's Your Turn Now, a teacher handbook available from: Outreach, Pre-College Programs, Gallaudet College, Washington, D.C. 20002.

For current information on the theory and application of dialogue journals, the newsletter Dialogue is available. Dialogue is published three times a year. Cost is $3 (pre-paid). To subscribe write to Jana Staton, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 10016. A volume of back issues, which includes a short history of dialogue journals, a bibliography, and abstracts of dissertations written on the topic is available for $5. Make checks payable to Jana Staton.